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New Challenges in East and Southeast Asian Studies¹

Johannes Dragsbaek Schmidt²

The point of departure is that there is a lack of critical and problem-oriented studies in East and South East Asia. This is furthermore accentuated by the inwardness and in some cases (of humanities) a parochial tendency of shying away from a dialogue with social science disciplines and thus an opening-up of area-studies. The principle objective of this contribution is to discuss these problems and relate to the central dichotomy and contradiction between growth and equity. It is apparent that the answers to some of these questions will vary according to approach, theoretical framework and, in quite a few cases, ideological assumptions. In the East and Southeast Asian context, the mainstream position has been descriptive and non-analytical while social critic, whether it is from a moderate and reformist or radical angle, has been surprisingly underdeveloped in the region.³ Relatively little attention has been devoted to critically examining the processes of social change either within each country or in a comparative perspective. This is probably one field where Nordic scholars can play a decisive role – a point I will return to below.

¹ Paper for the Roundtable: Asian Studies in the Nordic Countries at the Conference and PhD Course Asian Studies at a Turning Point: Tandem Walk or boxing match between social sciences and humanities?, Turku, Finland, 5 – 9 November 2006

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³ A rough distinction can be drawn between the various forms of critic: the moderate and reformist critic believes that the system is fundamentally sound, and/or that society is basically a good society. Any society falls short of its ideals, and given that we are all sinners, it is not surprising that things don't go as well as they might. This critic believes that existing institutions can and should be modified or augmented in various ways to permit or encourage society to approach more closely the appropriate ideals. The fact that most reflective people are at least moderate critics is not surprising. They usually have enough imagination to conceive of ways in which society might be better. Few such people believe that at the level of social institutions, this is the best of all possible worlds. By contrast radical critics believe that existing institutions are fundamentally unjust or immoral. See the discussion in Arnold, N. Scott, (1990), *Marx's Radical Critique of Capitalist Society. A Reconstruction and Critical Evaluation*, Oxford University Press, New York, p.3

From anthropological specie to emerging capitalist societies. Restating the debate about social formation with reference to East and Southeast Asia

As stated in the introduction to one recent book on the sociology of East and Southeast Asia, the region is a paradox. Viewed from economic, social, cultural, political and strategic standpoints - the region has a crucial importance. Yet the degree and quality of parts of the indigenous research often does not enable scholars to address the most important aspects of the region's current and future development. Other catching-up regions have developed their own theoretical debates and encounters. "In contrast, until recently, development studies within and on Southeast Asia have often been overly general, repetitive and descriptive, utilizing theories derived from other developmental experiences rather than generating indigenous explanations of the region and its place in the world economy"(Taylor and Turton 1988, p.1).

Although this situation has changed to the better recently, the question is why this situation had arisen? During colonial times Western academics found in Southeast Asia a virgin territory where sociology and social anthropology provided the best illustration of the vicarious colonization of the academic world by the West. These disciplines came as part of a package of Western education introduced by the indigenous rulers. Later modern social science arrived in the region from the West in the sense that the first researches in these societies were conducted by Western scholars, they also manned the first departments of political science, sociology and social anthropology, at least in Southeast Asia, and the first students from the region were trained mostly in the West. Sociology and social anthropology in the contemporary sense, are indeed a Western implantation (Atal 1985, pp.1-29).

Foreign scholars trying to explain questions related to development and underdevelopment in Southeast Asia must deal with the challenge of much of the most significant scholarship on the region now being written by Southeast Asian academics often in national languages (Anderson 1984, pp.41-56. Cf Hirschman 1992, p.47). Thus, colonial-era Orientalism has become ecologically obsolete. However, the research agendas left by the colonial legacy still play a considerable role in restricting vision and perpetuating conceptual underdevelopment during and after decolonization. In Southeast Asia, compared to other regions such as Latin America or South Asia, the critique of modernization theory came relatively late, with the consequence that as developmentalists began to examine their relevance, the theories themselves were already being seriously questioned. In the last two decades, however, this picture has changed as researchers are beginning to look more directly at the specific features of the region. According to Taylor and Turton the subjects subsequently chosen enabled the particularities of the region, individual countries and "sub-national" regions to be highlighted more clearly than had been the case previously. They include, first, a concern to analyze the economic and political effects of the region's increasing involvement in export-oriented strategies of growth, with particular reference to the effects of this on class formation. Secondly, new attention is being paid to the history and development of popular culture, and popular social and political movements, and on the constraints within which they have their existence. Thirdly, there is an emphasis on the importance of detailed local empirical studies of local processes of

agrarian transformation and differentiation. Finally, there is an increasing focus on issues of gender and gender relations, with special attention being given to such aspects as rural household production, migration, income inequality, technology and labour displacement, and industrial work and conditions.

The scepticism toward the traditional way of approaching the study of Southeast Asia stems from two currents of thought:ⁱ first, the 'post-modern' discovery that Southeast Asian studies was part of the 'modernists' project defining Southeast Asia in terms of 'outsiders' perceptions, vocabulary and texts which are now subject to 'new readings' and reinterpretation. A major figure in this theoretical reinterpretation has been Edward Said (1991 & 1993). Central to his vision is the formulation of a field of knowledge that reflect the imperial needs of the modernist era. This is perhaps no longer the most important issue since Southeast Asians are increasingly establishing the right to interpret their own societies and region. A second current is the new thrust towards the creation of Asia-Pacific studies which relies for its rationale of the 'miracle economies' and 'Asian-Pacific dynamism' as a justification of the mobilizing concept of the region. Accordingly, the Asia-Pacific region is "an intellectual construction that serves those who serve state and corporate power" and it is institutionalized in the form of regional groupings such as APEC. The consequence is according to Alexander Woodside that the creation of this intellectual supra-region is undermining the different nationalisms and cultures of the region (1993, pp.24-26).

However, the main point I want to make is that there is a shortage of Southeast Asian studies focusing on the role of emancipation, collective action and social change as a way of overcoming the traditional division of contemporary academic literature. The latter has been separated between what has been termed the ethnocentric Confucian perspective, the freedom of the market idea, and the statist focus on authoritarianism and guidance, while studies in a political economy perspective have been downplayed.

There is a shortage of East and Southeast Asian studies focusing on the role of emancipation, collective action and social change as a way of overcoming the traditional division of contemporary academic literature. The latter has been separated between what has been termed the ethnocentric Confucian perspective, the freedom of the market idea, and the statist focus on authoritarianism and guidance, while studies in a political economy perspective have been downplayed. With the end of neo-liberal globalization and the emergence of new catching-up economies cum global players like India and China there is a need to rethink development studies and international political economy. This has a major impact on humanities and social sciences in Europe, including the Nordic countries, and elsewhere which challenge the very notion of "area-studies" itself.

This is also the case with research on uneven development and questions related to inequality, class and stratification. In other parts of the world, analysis of class structure at an intermediate analytical level is one among several issues on which thinking and investigation have undergone significant changes. Looking at social class formation in late developing societies has begun to produce new approaches such as case-studies fit for comparisons between different locations and countries. Also analyses have appeared treating class structure and other aspects of group formation and interest-articulation, without classical

economic determinism and reductionism, as variables in relation to critical issues of public policy and institutional reform.

The common experience in late industrializing countries has revealed of civil societies in general and classes in particular as weakly organized and where considerations related to the logic of domination very often prevail over the logics of the market as well as of all other institutional spheres (Mouzelis 1994, p.127). In East and Southeast Asia the political consequences of the social changes attendant on evolving capitalism such as increasing material expectations, widening income gaps, rapid urbanization, the breakdown of older mechanisms of social control are apparent but not very well researched. In the words of Ruth McVey, this creates dependency: "The question of which direction the world economy will take - for the realization of Southeast Asia's capitalist promise depends ultimately on forces which the region has little power to affect" (1993, pp. 31-32).

What is needed then is region-specific comparative work and the areas interaction with international relations. This point is also made by Donald Emmerson who maintain that the preoccupation of area-studies specialists with cultural factors and values in the study of politics has prevented East and Southeast Asian studies in general from contributing to the disciplines of development studies and international relations. This situation is connected to a new situation in the relationship between East and Southeast Asian Area-studies and the social sciences where the disciplinary theory-markets carry an "inbuilt obsolescence." Not unlike the world of fashion, timing is everything and this year's style carries no value next year. For the imported-theory market, the product cycle seems shorter and shorter. Work that is entirely in this spirit may make for reputations in the short run, but unless it is very strong indeed, it risks disappearing without a trace when the theory that generated it has fallen out of fashion. This is especially the case with those post-modern modes of analysis in which the smaller the share of empirical information the greater the interpretive freedom of the author.

There is a strong need for indigenisation of development theory based on either nationalism, especially in Southeast Asia, or regionalism and a recognition of the fact that development may follow many diverse paths and polycentric directions. At the same time it is precisely the experience of disequilibrium with which political (and social) science and the sub-discipline, development theory, should be concerned.ⁱⁱ

East and Southeast Asia: Challenger or Myth?

During the last 40 years East Asia has seen a quadrupling of gross domestic products. Even Southeast Asia's share of exports to the world market has seen a slight increase, but mainly due to foreign investment in export-oriented industries. Even though it has been very modest. This new situation constitutes a challenge to the old industrialized societies and especially to their less-skilled workers, who now find themselves in direct competition with large numbers of new, low-cost industrial workers in Southeast Asia. The persistent twin crisis in Europe of unemployment and rising racist and social tensions, indicates that the industrial countries are often poorly equipped to handle the new competition.

A Chinese scholar who has made an in-depth study of the present financial straits of the European welfare states and their historical roots characterizes the West's welfare-state burden as "the Judeo-Christian growth handicap." The fact is that no East Asian industrializing country, neither in the North or South, has established a welfare state. This can be seen as a deliberate strategy and a significant comparative advantage. This non-committal attitude of the state towards equity objectives, welfare, and income distribution is clearly reflected in official public statements regarding the role of social security. A view which is probably widely shared in the region. The problem is that exactly the opposite has happened and this creates a great need for new scholarly work on these topics.

The emergence of China – challenging area-studies

Globalization is rapidly changing the overall structure of the international division of labor with the shift of services and manufacturing from the old industrialized economies to the new emerging giants - the global office platform in India and the global factory floor in China. This dislocation in production, services and manufacturing signifies a challenge which might be more important, but nevertheless part and parcel of the inherent imbalances in the world economy. Until recently there has been much academic and layman attention on over-production, growing inequalities, the increasing North-South gap, the roaring conflicts over energy and raw materials including oil and water, turbulence and crisis in the international financial system, and not least the fact that the present phase of capitalism has led to jobless growth in the established core economies in Europe and the United States. The question for the international political economy is where and how do countries like India and China fit in.?

One possible scenario is that we are entering a new phase of capitalism characterized by a changing production pattern with a shift of economic gravity to the East with corresponding consequences for labor markets, wage levels and living standards in the West; another scenario is related to the substance of the re-emergence of protectionism and a repeat of the all-out tariff battles that led to the Great Depression in the 1930s. In short, and very significantly, what are the responses of the old economies that are loosing out (Newsweek February 6, 2006)! The recent failed Chinese bid for a medium sized American oil company, UNOCAL, is a case in point and perhaps signal a movement towards the end of neo-liberal globalization. These pertinent issues raise a number of important questions which are relevant to both social sciences and the humanities but at the same it is doubtful whether area-studies are able to provide adequate answers to these challenges!

In conclusion and seen from a historical perspective, the emergence of China and to a lesser extent India as prime movers in the regional and world political economy is not without precedent. Late developers within the international capitalist system have always brought forth tensions between the up-coming power and the established core nations. The realpolitik explanation of confrontations and strategies in the interstate system does not capture the essence of the process at work. In contrast, the theoretical assumptions of critical international political economy, can better explicate the tensions created by China's rise by placing it in the context of the Japanese threat to US dominance in the Asiatic sphere prior to World War II. A worthwhile research agenda could be a comparative analysis of Japan's catching-up and its scheme of the Asiatic Co-prosperity Sphere with China's rise and challenge to the United States and Japanese positions in the region as a by-product of the Chinese attempt to create a regional community in Southeast Asia with China as its hub.

It is also important on a final note that the Nordic countries have lot to offer in the above context. Not least each country's historical experience with the often contradictory and conflictual processes leading to the evolution of the welfare states and for instance the specificity of the Danish flexicurity model can be seen as interesting political and social constructions for East and Southeast Asia.
